

VZCZCXR07075

PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV

DE RUEHLB #0952/01 1830956

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2372

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2557

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2852

RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000952

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

PRM A/S WITTEN, AMB FOLEY, HARRIS

ALSO FOR IO A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK

INL FOR A/S DAVID T. JOHNSON

USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/26/2018

TAGS: PREF PHUM PTER IQ LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SENIOR COORDINATOR FOLEY HEARS OF
IMPROVED TREATMENT OF IRAQI REFUGEES

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a June 26 visit to Beirut, Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugee Issues James Foley learned from the head of the agency responsible for immigration control, Surete Generale Director Wafiq Jezzini, that the Surete Generale has suspended its practice of detaining Iraqi refugees living in Lebanon without legal status. Jezzini also expressed willingness to waive overstay fines for Iraqi refugees who are selected for resettlement in the United States. Beirut UN High Commissioner for Refugees Deputy Representative Ayaki Ito assessed that the inflow of Iraqi refugees into Lebanon has stabilized, noting that the total number of Iraqi refugees is approximately 50,000 at present. Ito agreed to target referring an additional 2,000 Iraqi refugees to the United States for resettlement. Caretaker Cultural Affairs Minister Tariq Mitri, who served as Acting Foreign Minister until May 2008, remains an advocate for improved treatment of Iraqi refugees and volunteered to raise awareness of the Iraqi refugee situation to the new cabinet. He suggested that either the new Interior Minister or new Foreign Affairs Minister take the lead on this portfolio. End summary.

¶2. (C) In back-to-back meetings on June 26, Ambassador Foley, accompanied by Charge, Elizabeth Harris of PRM/A and poloff, met Director Major General Wafiq Jezzini and Brigadier General Siham Harake at the Surete Generale, Deputy Representative Ayaki Ito at the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office, and caretaker Cultural Affairs Minister Tariq Mitri in his office at The Ministry.

PAUSE IN DETAINING REFUGEES

¶3. (C) Referring to an agreement with UNHCR, Jezzini informed us of the Surete Generale's efforts over the past four months to release 177 Iraqi refugees from its detention centers. He noted that approximately 50 Iraqi refugees remain in detention but are scheduled for release; however, a number of them have criminal records in Lebanon. He is therefore reluctant to release these individuals. Harake explained that the Iraqi refugees were arrested because they entered the country illegally, noting that they were given the minimum sentence, one month, because of their situation.

¶ 4. (C) According to Jezzini, the Surete Generale, which gave these released refugees a three-month grace period to establish legal status, has been willing to extend the grace period by another three months. Jezzini also said his officers were instructed to refrain from arresting the illegal refugees at checkpoints. Foley urged Jezzini to continue refraining from imprisoning the Iraqi refugees and to maintain protective space for the community.

RESETTLEMENT PROCESS TOO SLOW

¶ 5. (C) Informing us that 100,000 Iraqi refugees currently live in Lebanon, Jezzini declared that Lebanon cannot accept the Iraqi refugees because of the overwhelming number of Palestinian refugees Lebanon also must accommodate (an estimated 400,000). Jezzini said the resettlement process for Iraqis is too slow. Harake offered the Surete Generale's services to help with departure passes for resettled Iraqi refugees, transportation to the airport, and anything else that might speed up the process. Jezzini inquired whether the U.S. could push other countries to resettle more Iraqi refugees.

¶ 6. (C) Foley informed Jezzini that DHS representatives currently processing refugee cases at Embassy Beirut will be looking at 1,900 Iraqi refugee cases for resettlement in the coming months, and have started interviewing as of June 23. He expressed the U.S.'s intention to raise the numbers of resettled Iraqi refugees, noting that security conditions in

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Beirut prevented the DHS representatives from starting as scheduled in May. Foley mentioned that, in his June 27 stop in Geneva, he would push UNHCR to pass more cases to the U.S. and inquire about forwarding additional cases to other countries, including Canada and Australia.

WILLING TO WAIVE
OVERSTAY FINES

¶ 7. (C) In response to Foley's request that the Surete Generale consider waiving the overstay fines (\$630 per person) the Iraqi refugees are subjected to upon departure from Lebanon, Harake agreed to work with UNHCR to waive the fees, on the basis of a humanitarian exception.

IN NEED OF AMBULANCE,
PRISON REFURBISHMENT

¶ 8. (C) Noting the USG delivery of 189 Dodge Chargers to the Internal Security Forces (ISF), another Lebanese security service, Jezzini opined that the Surete Generale needs vehicles, as well as assistance with the detention center and prison refurbishment. Harake interjected that the Surete Generale desperately needs an ambulance. (Note: INL/Embassy Beirut is exploring funding options for requested ambulance. End note.) Ambassador Foley used this opportunity to again argue against the detention of Iraqi refugees.

UNHCR RELIES ON
"CONTINUING FLEXIBILITY"
OF LEBANESE AUTHORITIES

¶ 9. (C) Ayaki Ito, from UNHCR, spoke of the Surete Generale's detention of the Iraqi refugees, saying that 70 percent of all refugees in Lebanon are illegal, and the Surete Generale's policy of arresting individuals without legal status has been a continuing problem. Typically, Ito said, the Iraqi refugees are given a choice by Surete Generale to "voluntarily" repatriate to Iraq, or face indefinite detention. Last year, he continued, there were 800 refugees

or asylum seekers in detention, and 90 percent of them were Iraqi.

¶10. (C) Ito confirmed that when released, refugees are given three months to find employment and secure a residence permit. However, he warned, it is difficult to find a job because it is costly to the employer to hire a legal worker as opposed to an illegal worker. Moreover, Ito said, the refugees earn more money when working illegally. Ito noted the Surete Generale's flexibility in extending the three months to a six-month grace period. Absent a legal framework, Ito stated, UNHCR is relying on the "continuing flexibility" of the Surete Generale. Ito reported that the Lebanese Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces have also both been more flexible with checking documents at checkpoints.

FEWER REFUGEES
ENTERING LEBANON

¶11. (C) Ito rejected the Surete Generale's estimate of 100,000 Iraqi refugees, believing that 50,000 is more realistic based upon a Danish government survey. Ito believed the Surete Generale exaggerates the number because of Lebanese "paranoia regarding the Palestinian refugees."

¶12. (C) He said that 10,000 Iraqi refugees have registered at UNHCR, adding that he is seeing fewer registrations recently. He said that if a registered refugee is detained, UNHCR can work to get the individual released. Registering also provides the refugee with a certificate which can be shown at checkpoints. He believes that fewer refugees are coming to Lebanon, according to registration numbers and arrests made at the borders, both of which have dropped.

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MOST IRAQI REFUGEES IN LEBANON ARE SHIA;
MANY TAKEN CARE OF BY HIZBALLAH

¶13. (C) Ito assessed that most Iraqi refugees reside in Beirut, with a number of them in Nabatieh in southern Lebanon. Forty five percent of those registered at UNHCR are Shia, with Christians making up the second largest group at 26 percent, according to Ito. Ito believed that Hizballah is assisting the Iraqi Shias, saying, "if the refugee goes to Dahiyyeh (the southern suburb of Beirut and a Hizballah stronghold), he will be O.K."

¶14. (C) Rent, food, medical care, and school are the largest expenses refugees face, Ito explained, adding that rent and food prices have risen dramatically recently. UNHCR covers a portion of medical and schooling expenses, as well as food coupons, on a case-by-case, emergency basis. He mentioned there are many religious charities that provide the same services and money to the Iraqi Shia refugees.

WILLING TO REFER
ADDITIONAL CASES
TO THE U.S.

¶15. (C) "Resettlement is an effective tool," Ito stated, "but we have to manage expectations." He added that 70 percent of UNHCR's caseload has been met, and some of the remaining refugees have a weaker claim to resettlement, explaining that they left Iraq for economic reasons (showing a chart indicating 70 percent of Iraqi refugees are male, the majority of whom are between 20 and 40 years old) rather than because of vulnerability issues. Ito agreed to refer more cases to the U.S., affirming he would try for 2,000 additional referrals.

¶16. (C) When asked by Foley about other countries' Iraqi

refugee resettlement progress, Ito reported that in the previous year, UNHCR referred a total of 700 to other countries, and 759 to the United States. He added that Australia and Canada have relatively slow processing times and have stated they will not accept more referrals from Lebanon.

UNHCR TO PREPARE A LIST OF
THOSE ELIGIBLE FOR FEE WAIVERS

¶17. (C) Noting that currently UNHCR covers the \$630 overstay fine (as well as the \$40 departure pass fees) the GOL charges for resettled refugees who are leaving Lebanon, Ito was receptive to the suggestion that the Surete Generale waive the fines if UNHCR prepares a list of all of the eligible Iraqi refugees to be resettled.

MINISTER MITRI WILL RAISE ISSUE IN CABINET

¶18. (C) Recounting how the refugee portfolio landed in his lap, caretaker Cultural Affairs Minister Tariq Mitri said he was appalled when reading of the refugees' plight in Lebanon in the Human Rights Watch report, and brought the issue to Prime Minister Siniora's attention. Since it was unclear whose domain the refugees fell in, Siniora requested Mitri, who was also serving as Acting Foreign Minister at the time, and has been involved in the Middle East Council of Churches, to take responsibility. Mitri explained that because Lebanon has not signed any of the international conventions protecting refugee rights, the refugees are particularly vulnerable in Lebanon and are subject to detention.

¶19. (C) Mitri suspected that many Iraqi refugees chose to come to Lebanon because they believed Lebanon offered better job opportunities and because they thought their situation would receive more international attention (and therefore increased resettlement potential) since the Iraq refugee population is comparatively smaller in Lebanon than in Syria or Jordan.

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¶20. (C) Mitri agreed with UNHCR's estimate of 50,000 refugees, explaining that the Surete Generale may be inflating the number because many Christian and Shia refugees have integrated into the communities, particularly in southeastern Beirut, where the population figure is already "an enigma." There are many Iraqi Assyrian and Chaldean clerics who arrived in Lebanon in the 1950s who have accommodated the Iraqi Christians. Plus, he added, the registration rate is low, so it is difficult to assess the true number.

RAISING CABINET AWARENESS

¶21. (C) Believing that many in the government hesitate to work on this issue for fear of being accused of disrupting the confessional balance, Mitri offered to report to the next cabinet on the work he has done to date. He suggested that PM-designate Siniora assign the portfolio to the new Interior or Foreign Affairs Minister. "The situation is too serious to be left solely to the Surete Generale," Mitri asserted.

¶22. (U) Ambassador Foley cleared this message.
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